VI. Approaches to Conducting Future Studies

This section addresses the SB 2030 requirement to provide input and recommendations to CDSS in planning and conducting future workload studies.

A mechanism to re-evaluate and update workload/caseload standards on a perpetual basis to incorporate state-of-the-art program changes, legislative mandates, and demographic and societal changes is **not** recommended. It is not recommended because of the cost, the loss of productive time of participating staff without a comparable positive return, and the negative effect on staff morale, combined with the fact that that much data often cannot be effectively used. Since a perpetual method would require constant data collection, staff would grow weary and start being less diligent in their time reporting, thus the results would become less and less accurate over time.

On the other hand, the results of this study demonstrate that the workload standards established by the state 15 years ago are not in sync with current case activity. This underlines the importance of being able to continue to conduct workload studies with a reasonable degree of frequency.

Recommendations

1. **Implement a periodic statewide, program-wide, scientific study mechanism combined with an 'as needed' small-scale study mechanism to address best practice areas.**

   A periodic study is recommended to incorporate state-of-the-art program changes, legislative mandates, and demographic and societal changes. An example of the result could be one or two small studies per year for several years, then a statewide study, or there could be no studies for a couple of years and then a statewide study or one or more small studies. There would be studies only when the data was needed and the size of the study would match the need.

The Periodic Scientific Study Approach would require a full, statewide, work measurement time study only once every few years—as frequently as circumstances change sufficiently (state-of-the-art program changes, legislative mandates, and demographic and societal changes) to require new program methods, or different amounts of effort. Updating of workload and caseload standards, using the new data and the same standards-setting methodology used for this study, would follow each new study. Generally, if no major changes have occurred, we would

recommend such a study at least every five years. Since change in child welfare is usually incremental, and not occurring simultaneously in all program areas, the recommended approach should provide the most up-to-date data needed, on the areas it is needed, and not on the areas that have not changed in approach or effort. This would be a much more efficient and effective approach than a perpetual approach.

2. **Future statewide, program-wide, workload studies should be conducted every three to five years and use a statistically valid random sample of staff to determine the number of study participants.**

   The methodology for this study included nearly all eligible employees in local child welfare departments, however this approach is not recommended for future studies due to its cost and level of disruption to the participating staff. A sampling approach is instead recommended. In order to ensure a bias-free sampling methodology, a census of county staff should be undertaken at regular intervals. Data on staffing numbers and patterns from this census would then be used to create a representative, randomized sample.

3. **Future periodic studies should collect data for one month (two 2-week periods at different times during the year).**

   The current methodology collected data for two weeks, but it would be preferable, especially if using a representative sample, to conduct time study data for a longer period in two sessions separated by a long-time interval. This would minimize the possibility of non-systemic events (such as a surge of reporting which often occurs at the start of a school semester) from having a disproportionate effect on the results.

4. **Continue to Use the Time Log Methodology Used in the Current Study**

5. **Develop a 3- to 5-year plan to conduct small-scale special studies to address best practices and emerging practices.**

   The Small-scale Study Approach would be used when data for only one program area is needed. For example, if next year there are significant changes in federal mandates or state legislative mandates for Emergency Response Investigations, but not to other program areas, then a small-scale time study focused only on the needed information for this program area could be undertaken. Similarly, this approach could be used for best practice areas such as family group conferencing.

The small-scale, 'as needed' studies would choose from a variety of methods depending on the need. One approach might be to use the same methods as the statewide studies, except limited to specified program areas. Another method might be to use a Structured Estimation methodology, which uses only a few participants for each area being studied to make the estimations. Another approach might be to use a Laboratory method, with a selected and limited number of staff to perform their duties according to a new set of program requirements, and measuring now long it

takes them to do the job with these new rules. The appropriate methodology would be selected each time a study is needed. Project staff would advise program staff of appropriate alternative methods for each new study needed.

6. Develop an infrastructure to support ongoing workload studies.

Both specialized small-scale studies and periodic statewide and program-wide studies would benefit from the development of an infrastructure that would allow CDSS to conduct studies more routinely and more cost effectively. It would also allow such studies to be carried out quickly and has the potential for producing higher quality data and data analysis. The key infrastructure elements are as follow:

CDSS Staffing

An essential aspect of an ongoing infrastructure is the internal CDSS support of staff with knowledge and experience in the conduct of workload studies. During periods when studies are not conducted, these staff could analyze existing workload-related data, develop plans for future studies, and contribute to the formulation of other aspects of the workload infrastructure development process. During the conduct of the workload studies, these staff would act as team leaders. One possible staffing configuration would be a half-time analyst position coupled with a research assistant.

CWS/CMS Application

The workload data collection application developed for the SB 2030 study is an example of an application for workload data collection. The development of a similar tool more closely integrated with CWS/CMS would allow for the collection of data more routinely. In order to integrate an application closely with CWS/CMS, the following is suggested:

- Any software designed to interact with the existing system should take into account the limitations of workstation hardware. The minimum requirements for a PC networked to the CWS/CMS leave little room for additional software applications. The current study fully used personal computer capacity and is a feasible way to proceed in the future. Efficiency gains may be expected in future work that streamlines the processes. The data transmission structure used off peak system capability in a cost efficient manner. Increased efficiency would be particularly valuable to end users both at the beginning of the study during installation and timely ending of the study with the deletion of study work files on the desk tops.

- If data is collected through the use of the server system, a general, system-wide hardware/software/network mapping audit should be conducted. The one used in this study provides a starting point and should be periodically updated. This would aid in the creation of a data transmission infrastructure, which would not impact negatively on the current system. This transmission infrastructure could then remain in place in perpetuity, to transmit data for program-wide workload studies.

Conclusion

The study recommendations reported in this summary provide support for the idea that changes in requirements and expectations for the CWS program have increased the time needed to provide services. More than anything, the change from the current standards to the minimum recommended standards reflects the 15-year gap between reviews of these standards and the new requirements and demands on staff that have been introduced during that period.

There are undoubtedly many opportunities to address improvements in productivity that are beyond the scope of this study. Providing more time to reach better initial decisions might reduce the need for additional services in the future. Reducing the required expectations in some areas might also reduce the time needed to provide certain services. However, these improvements cannot be expected to substantially address the large gap between the current standards and the minimum standard recommendations from this evaluation.

An example of a critical program area that deserves further scrutiny from this standpoint is the permanent placement program. It is in this area that the most significant gap between the current standard and minimum time was identified. It is also in this area that the most significant policy changes from the Federal government have occurred. Most other states that have developed standards in this area allow staff more time to provide services to children in permanent placement. Furthermore, efforts to reduce length of stay by focusing more attention on these children could have a major impact on the overall caseload level in this area. Success in impacting this area will require better information on the specific needs and conditions of children, a better understanding of how children transition to the range of permanent placements including emancipation, and the impact of new federal requirements.

Many of the program improvement activities reviewed as best practices have the potential to contribute to long-range improvements in both the productivity and effectiveness of service provision. However, to take full advantage of the opportunities these represent it will be

important for CDSS to develop more approaches to monitoring and evaluating CWS performance and improve the evaluation infrastructure accordingly.